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SUBJECT: MINORITY PARLIAMENTARY PARTY CONCERNED ABOUT
ELECTIONS

REF: A. CONAKRY 0089

¶B. CONAKRY 0069

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Although leaders of the UPR opposition political parties see elections as an important political element, they remain pessimistic as to whether elections can be organized transparently and in a timely fashion. They were circumspect with regards to Guinea's current political environment, but seemed unconvinced that various actors will be able to find a workable solution to the political impasse stemming from a power struggle between the president and the prime minister. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Continuing a series of initial meetings with Guinea's main political parties (reftel A), the Ambassador met with leaders of the Union for Progress and Renewal (UPR) opposition party on February 5. Party President Ousmane Bah was accompanied by three members of his executive bureau: Mr. Yaya Keita (Administrative Secretary), Mr. Hamidou Diallo (External Relations), and Diao Kante (Elections). All four UPR members are also deputies in the National Assembly, representing the only legislatively active opposition party. Poloff also participated in the meeting.

NOWHERE CLOSE TO ELECTIONS

¶3. (SBU) After exchanging pleasantries, the meeting focused almost exclusively on elections. Diao Kante told the Ambassador that everyone is waiting for a concrete idea of how much time is needed to register voters with the new kits being provided by the European Union and then everyone will agree on a date for elections and an appropriate preparatory schedule. He noted that some Guineans are talking about holding elections as early as June, but that he is personally pessimistic about such a timeline. According to Kante, one of the reasons behinds the CENI's (National Independent Electoral Commission) budget woes is the fact that the commission has been unable to put together a well defined budget coupled with the fact that CENI financing was not included in the national budget passed by the National Assembly. Kante noted that funds for campaign financing, which is permitted under the election reform law passed in 2007, was also not included in the national budget. Kante said that it will be difficult for the government to find money for elections since the newly returned IMF program does not allow for extra-budgetary expenditures.

¶4. (SBU) Kante also noted that the Guinean electoral code requires that at least 60 days must elapse between when the voter lists are completed and when elections are actually

held. He said that the registration process is likely to take a couple of months and if 60 days is added on top of that, Guinea will already be in its rainy season. Kante added that he did not think it was possible to organize elections in 2008 and that they should probably be pushed to 2009, which would mean that they could get pushed to 2010 and be held conjointly with the presidential elections in order to reduce the financial burden on the government.

¶15. (SBU) The Ambassador questioned whether the UPR thought budgetary issues were really the problem or whether political will was lacking. Ousmane Bah chuckled at that point and said that political will is the underlying issue. He said that the ruling Party for Unity and Progress (PUP) is not interested in elections and is blocking progress. He noted that other opposition parties want the elections, but lack the courage to push back. The Ambassador emphasized that if Guinea fails to hold legislative elections before the end of 2008, the U.S. will be forced to seriously reconsider its proposed elections assistance program.

DEMOCRATIC AT HEART

¶16. (SBU) Emphasizing that a strong democracy requires adherence to democratic principles within its organizational structures, the Ambassador asked Bah if the UPR sees itself as a democratic institution. Bah said that the UPR is absolutely democratic at heart, and that it will hold a national convention to elect the party's candidates for the elections. Speaking of democracy in general, Bah reminded the Ambassador that it is just since April that we have had a true multiparty system,, and the parties are learning how to operate in this new system.

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ETHNIC PROBLEMS) BUT NOT FOR US

¶17. (SBU) Citing concerns about parties appearing to be organized according to ethnicity, the Ambassador asked Bah how the UPR sees the ethnic issue. Bah acknowledged that much of the party's support comes from the Fouta region (Peuhls), but that the party is represented throughout the country. Although he did not necessarily see ethnicity as a major issue for the UPR, he told the Ambassador that he agrees that ethnicity is a problem that the political parties need to address.

PM HAS FAILED TO DELIVER

¶18. (SBU) The Ambassador also asked Bah for his thoughts on the current political environment. Bah said that Prime Minister Lansana Kouyate always seems to say the right things,, but that his actions do not support his words. He noted that the PM always claims that things are fine between the presidency and the PM, but that things are clearly at odds. Bah added that the PM made a number of promises to the population and people are still waiting for those promises to be met.

¶19. (SBU) Turning to the labor unions, plan to resume a nationwide strike on March 31 if the January 27 Accords are not respected, Bah asked what is our exit?, He said that the problem has not been resolved and it is unclear whether the existing mechanisms are going to be able to offer a workable solution. The Ambassador encouraged Bah to work with other actors toward a national dialogue. Bah noted that the opposition parties planned to meet with the labor unions on February 6 to discuss opportunities for collaboration.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Based on various meetings with political parties by the Ambassador and Poloff, all the parties seem to see ethnicity as a potentially dangerous, divisive issue in the upcoming elections) but only for all the other parties.

Ousmane Bah was no different although he did acknowledge that his support base is predominantly Fulani. On the question of democratic structures within party institutions, all of the parties are equally eager to assure Embassy officials of their inherent democratic structure. This may be true with respect to the 33 seats determined by individual prefectures, but it is much less clear for the remaining 81 seats which have traditionally been doled out according to various indicators of influence such as financial wealth, social status, etc.

¶11. (SBU) Echoing comments made to Poloff on January 23, Ousmane Bah and his UPR colleagues appear to be less than optimistic when it comes to elections. They seem to agree that the elections are important, but less convinced that they can be organized transparently and in a timely manner. As the only opposition party in the National Assembly, the UPR deputies have more than six years experience dealing with the ruling party's machine and are probably very familiar with real and potential institutional blockages,, which could be coloring their outlook on elections. At the same time, the UPR may be concerned about its own popular support since it initially began as more of a political construct designed to counterbalance the PUP. With Sidya Toure (UFR) and Cellou Diallo (UFDG) likely to draw significant Fulani support, the UPR may be worried about its own political standing, and not unlike the PUP, less than eager to push too hard for elections that may end or reduce their political influence. For the time being, the UPR seems to be in wait and see, mode. END COMMENT.

CARTER